

‘Is Musical Performance Worth Saving?’ The importance of musical performance in teaching and learning about music

Introduction

For the very first time in human history, the question posed as the title of this article can be, and, I believe, must be asked. (Reimer 1994, p.1)

The specialness of musical performance is that it is one of the relatively few ways humans have to be intelligent’ (Reimer 1994, p.17).

Reimer’s question, which has been borrowed for the title of this chapter, is an important one for all music educators. Maybe you consider it a strange way to start a chapter that is probably going to emphasise the educational importance of musical performance? But Reimer’s concern should spur us to think carefully about the practice and purpose of musical performance within music education. This chapter will seek to address this issue through asking three questions:

1. Why does Reimer feel musical performance is under threat?
2. Why is musical performance a necessary part of every pupil’s music education?
3. What should characterise teachers’ approaches to the teaching of musical performance?

In light of these questions, it will then look at the practical issues surrounding the teaching of musical performance for the high school music teacher.

| Task 1 |
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| Spend some time considering how you would answer the second and third questions. In particular, think about where your own beliefs about the value of musical performance come from and how they have developed throughout your musical career to this point. |

Why is musical performance under threat?

We who are alive today are the first to be confronted with the very real possibility that musical performance, without which music heretofore could not have existed, is in danger of becoming obsolete in, or at least tangential to, the art of music. (Reimer 1994, p.1)

Reimer’s words sound ominous, strange and threatening. For the majority of musicians in the Western world skilful musical performance is the highest and most valued attribute of musicianship. The status of musical performer is something to which many young musicians aspire and spend their formative years seeking after. So how can it be possible that musical performance is in danger of losing its place as the pinnacle of musical

achievement and understanding? Reimer highlights three technological developments that have placed the position of musical performance under threat.

1. Musical performance has become a matter of choice not necessity

Sound recording and playback technologies have had a number of consequences in our Western culture (see Chanan 1995 for a full analysis). Firstly, access to music of an incredible range and quality has increased, especially through downloads from online stores. The consequence of this increased availability is that people can now experience music of a diversity and complexity far beyond their own abilities to produce. Musical performance has become an activity of choice rather than necessity.

2. Musical performance has become a specialised activity

Secondly, the limitations of mediocre performance have become increasingly apparent because these same technologies have professionalised performance for the mass audience. Said discusses the impact of this:

The specialisation of the aesthetic activity of musical performance (Said 1991, p.2), or the professionalisation of performance, is indicative of a culture that values musical products more than musical processes. But as educators the developmental process by which performers or composers refine their skills should intrigue us and provide useful pedagogical models (Savage 2004).

But even though it was not necessary for the majority of people to perform in order to enjoy or engage in music, musical performance still remained an important component of music practice until the third large technological development.

3. Musical performance has become an unnecessary interference between composer and audience

Composers have long sought for more direct communication with their audiences. Over the last 100 years innovations in compositional style and process have been huge and these have impacted the musical performer's position. With the advent of computer technologies performance has become an unnecessary factor in bridging the gap between a composer's thinking and the sharing of that thinking with listeners. As Reimer puts it:

This time the role of performance will be changed even more than it was by the phonograph. That change may well be in the direction of extinction. (Reimer 1994, p.4)

Or to put it in another way, are performers necessary to music in the 21st century?

Is the performer-interpreter merely a contingent component in the art form music? Is it merely a contingent fact that music is a performing art, at least as has been understood for some 1000-plus years? Is it just an accident of technology

that for some centuries certain manually skilled specialists were needed to intervene, as it were, between inventors and their audience? (Godlovitch 1992, p.1)

What are we to make of this analysis? Should we be celebrating the beginning of the eventual end of performance? As educators should we be prepared to sacrifice musical performance in light of the democratisation of composition through computer technologies and the democratisation of listening through recording technologies? There is a need for us to face up to these increasingly diverse models of musical production and consumption in respect of musical performance. We need to fundamentally reconsider what is meant by musical performance skills and understanding, and how these can best be taught within classrooms.

Why is musical performance a necessary part of every pupil's music education?

In light of this analysis it is important to consider what the value of musical performance is in music education. Drawing on the work of Reimer and others, musical performance should be considered an integrated part of every pupils' music education for the following reasons.

1. Musical performance is a type of intelligence

Performance can be conceived as an act of intelligence because it is dependent on and springs from the skills of a knowing body. Within musical performance thinking and body are unified. The practice of musical performance is a primary way in which musical problems are dealt with and by which musical thinking takes place.

Our approach to teaching performance needs to be guided by the fundamental principle that we are developing an inherent human intelligence, in which thinking, feeling and acting are uniquely conjoined in the process of bringing music ideas to sonic fruition. (Reimer 1994, p.20)

2. Musical performance is craftsmanship

Craftsmanship, defined as the control in and by the body of musical thinking, is an essential element in performance. It is the body's manifestation of creative musical problem solving in which skill, thought and feelings are unitary. Musical performance is much more than just recreating the notes on the score. Cook reminds us that:

The score is prehistoric to the performance...it is abolished in the act of performance, for the listener it simply does not exist. (Cook 1990, p.156)

Elliott argues strongly that music education needs to provide every pupil with the opportunity to achieve this unique form of craftsmanship available through musical

performance, stating that ‘making music through performing takes learners to the heart of music practices’. (Elliott 1995, p.173)

3. Musical performance is an essential form of making music

Scheffler writes that musical performance is an essential form of making music because:

Engaging in the process of making allows us to relate process and product, to understand them in connection with one another and so to learn something valuable about action in general. (Scheffler 1988, p.75)

Engaging in the process of musical performance is the best way to experience music’s symbolic power. There is much of intrinsic benefit for pupils to gain from this experience alone. As Swanwick puts it:

The act of shaping music is a purposeful attempt to articulate something meaningful. It will be articulate, expressive and structured. (Swanwick1992, p.24)

What should characterise teachers’ approaches to the teaching of musical performance?

Musical performance is a key element in both the National Curriculum and GCSE specifications. Teachers need to be aware of these contexts and the role they play in shaping approaches to performance opportunities in the classroom setting.

Musical Performance at Key Stage 3

The National Curriculum for Music places musical performance as part of an integrated approach to teaching music alongside composing and appraising. The opening sentence of the Key Stage 3 Programme of Study is essential:

Teaching should ensure that **listening, and applying knowledge and understanding**, are developed through the interrelated skills of **performing, composing** and **appraising**. [bold text in the original] (DfES 1999, p.20)

Each of the following Knowledge, Skills and Understanding statements is preceded by the important text, ‘Pupils should be taught how to ...’. This places an important emphasis on the teacher’s role to generate the various knowledge, skills and understanding of each pupil throughout the Key Stage. Whilst teachers can, and should, engineer situations where pupils can learn from each other or through a process of self-discovery, ultimately teachers themselves are required to teach these things.

Each Key Stage contains a set of statements about the knowledge, skills and understanding that need to be taught. These are summarised in the following table:

| |
|---|
| Controlling sounds through singing and playing – performing skills |
|---|

| <i>Pupils should be taught how to:</i> | | | |
|--|--|--|---|
| | Key Stage 1 | Key Stage 2 | Key Stage 3 |
| 1a | Use their voices expressively by singing songs and speaking chants and rhymes. | Sing songs, in unison and two parts, with clear diction, control of pitch, a sense of phrase and musical expression. | Sing unison and part songs developing vocal techniques and musical expression. |
| 1b | Play tuned and untuned instruments. | Play tuned and untuned instruments with control and rhythmic accuracy. | Perform with increasing control of instrument-specific techniques. |
| 1c | Rehearse and perform with others. | Practise, rehearse and present performances with an awareness of the audience. | Practise, rehearse and perform with awareness of different parts, the roles and contribution of the different members of the group, and the audience and venue. |

The progressive nature of these statements does not imply that the knowledge of one Key Stage should replace that of the previous one. There should be an accumulation of knowledge, skills and understanding as pupil's work proceeds throughout the National Curriculum.

The importance of integrated musical activities permeates the National Curriculum documentation. Within each Key Stage there are 'Breadth of Study' statements that support the generation of performing skills. Many of these are common throughout the three Key Stages. But in the Key Stage 2 & 3 one reads that ...

During the key stage, pupils should be taught the **Knowledge, skills and understanding** through ...

using ICT to capture, change and combine sound (Key Stage 2);
using ICT to create, manipulate and refine sounds (Key Stage 3).

(DfES 1999, pp.19-21)

These statements refer equally to the development of pupils' performing, composing, appraising and listening skills. Therefore, and in light of recent technological advances, teachers should be planning for ways in which pupils can perform with new technologies (and not just those pupils who cannot play a traditional tuned or untuned instrument). Musical performance within the National Curriculum model is much more than solely instrumental performance. Teachers should also be engaging their pupils in performance through singing and in the use of ICT. This is an important riposte to Reimer's analysis discussed above. New technologies provide a wonderful opportunity to extend the nature of musical performance in new directions.

What are the practical skills that pupils should be acquiring through this model of music performance? The level descriptors for the attainment target contain some interesting statements (DfES 1999, pp.36-37). Each statement opens with a general statement of attainment and is followed by a description of that statement in respect of performing, composing and listening outcomes. The following table lists these statements in respect of the performing component for each level:

| The Attainment Target | | |
|---|--|--|
| Level | General Statement | Performing Skills |
| 1 | Pupils recognise and explore how sounds can be made and changed. | They use their voices in different ways such as speaking, singing and chanting, and perform with awareness of others. |
| 2 (Expected attainment at the end of Key Stage 1) | Pupils recognise and explore how sounds can be organised. | They sing with a sense of the shape of the melody, and perform simple patterns and accompaniments to a steady pulse. |
| 3 | Pupils recognise and explore the ways sounds can be combined and used expressively. | They sing in tune with expression and perform rhythmically simple parts that use a limited range of notes. |
| 4 (Expected attainment at the end of Key Stage 2) | Pupils identify and explore the relationship between sounds and how music reflects different intentions. | While performing by ear and from simple notations they maintain their own part with awareness of how the different parts fit together and the need to achieve an overall effect. |
| 5 <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">(Expected attainment at the end of Key Stage 3)</div> | Pupils identify and explore musical devices and how music reflects time and place. | They perform significant parts from memory and from notations with awareness of their own contribution such as leading others, taking a solo part and/or providing rhythmic support. |
| 6 | Pupils identify and explore the different processes and contexts of selected musical genres and styles. | They select and make expressive use of tempo, dynamics, phrasing and timbre. They make subtle adjustments to fit their own part within a group performance. |
| 7 | Pupils discriminate and explore musical conventions in, and influences on, selected genres, styles and traditions. | They perform in different styles, making significant contributions to the ensemble and using relevant notations. |
| 8 | Pupils discriminate and exploit the characteristics and expressive potential of selected musical resources, genres, styles and traditions. | They perform, improvise and compose extended compositions with a sense of direction and shape, both within melodic and rhythmic phrases and overall form. |
| Exceptional Performance | Pupils discriminate and develop different interpretations. | They give convincing performances and demonstrate empathy with other performer. |

Task 2

Analyse the general and performing skills statements in the above table. Do these statements reflect the ways that people typically develop as performers? How do they relate to your experiences on instrumental learning? Think about performers in other musical traditions from your own (perhaps in popular or world music traditions). Do these statements reflect the ways in which they have learnt how to perform?

Finally, consider the accumulative or progressive nature of these statements. What do they prioritise as being important to performance skill? How are you going to design lessons or schemes of work that systematically address these areas and develop these skills in your own pupils?

There are two important features of the attainment target and levels that should be carefully noted.

Firstly, just like the Knowledge, Skills and Understanding strands of each Key Stage, there is a sense of accumulation in the level strands of the attainment target. ‘Discriminating and exploring musical conventions in selected genres, styles and traditions’ (level 7) does not replace the need to ‘recognise and explore the ways sounds can be combined and used expressively’ (level 3). Both aspects should be evidenced in a pupils’ work at level 7. Similarly ‘singing in tune and with expression’ (level 3) is not replaced by ‘performing in different styles, making significant contributions to the ensemble and using relevant notations’ otherwise the results would be ridiculous!

Secondly, in relation to the practical use the attainment target and levels the National Curriculum document is very clear:

The level descriptions provide the basis for making judgments about pupils’ performance **at the end of key stages 1, 2 and 3**. [my emphasis] (DfES 1999, p.36)

The legal requirement is for teachers to make use of these level statements in a final report, perhaps to parents, at the end of the Key Stage. *They were not designed to be a week-by-week assessment device or a means of assessing pupil achievement at the end of a scheme of work.* There might be a case for teachers legitimately using the content of the level statements to assist their process of regular assessment and help define appropriate learning objectives in their planning. But the overuse of such a mechanistic approach to assessment would be detrimental to a pupil’s overall musical development.

Musical Performance at Key Stage 4

Opportunities for musical performance at Key Stage 4 should follow on naturally from the experiences pupils have gained during Key Stage 3. Therefore, just as an integrated approach to performing, composing and listening/appraising was central to Key Stage 3 work, so it should be at Key Stage 4.

Each of the main exam boards presents their own requirements for the musical performance aspect of the GCSE examination.

| Comparison of the GCSE Performance Criteria (for examination in 2006) | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| | AQA | Edexcel | OCR |
| Solo Performance | 1 solo piece (12½%) | 1 solo piece (15%) | 1 solo piece (10%) |
| Ensemble Performance/Performance during the course | 1 ensemble piece (12) (There is also a performance/realisation dimension of the integrated assignment) | Perform/direct 2 pieces (including Composition 1 = 15%) | 2 further pieces of which one must be an ensemble (20%) |
| Solo Performance definition | Instrument or voice (see note about ICT below) | Play, sing or sequence (minimum of 3 simultaneous tracks or timbres) | Instrument or voice |
| Ensemble Performance/Performance During the Course definition | Instrument or voice allowing genuine ensemble skills to be demonstrated. Solo performances accompanied by a piano or guitar does not equal an ensemble for the soloist, but may be considered an ensemble for the accompanist. | Performing an undoubled part within an ensemble or group. This can include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directing an ensemble • Solo performance using a sequencer • Improvising as part of an ensemble • Ensemble performance using music technology. | Significant individual part in an ensemble |
| ICT Inclusive or Exclusive | ICT exclusive ‘Performances incorporating the use of multi-track recordings and other forms of ICT are also eligible as solo performances. There must be a live performance of at least one part at the point of assessment. Performing skills must be demonstrated and, as such, DJ’ing is not an eligible activity. | ICT inclusive | ICT exclusive ‘If candidates enhance their performing using ICT, credit is available for the musical enhancement shown in the outcome, not for the understanding of ICT ’. |
| Marking | 1. /8 for accuracy of pitch & rhythm 2. /8 for interpretative qualities 3. /8 for expressive qualities 4. /6 for demand For ensemble pieces (2) and | /10 for accuracy /15 for interpretation (and ensemble in the case of Performing during the course) | /10 for musicality (and ensemble when appropriate) /5 for difficulty |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| | (3) are combined and an additional mark for ensemble is included (marked /8) | | |
|--|--|--|--|

Each GCSE examination board is concerned with developing pupils' musical performance skills in a number of various areas such as:

- Technical control;
- Musical expression;
- Interpretation;
- Accuracy of rhythm and pitch;
- Appropriate tempi;
- Dynamic contrast;
- Fluency;
- Phrasing;
- Stylistic awareness.

However, there are significant differences in at least two areas:

- What is the appropriate use of ICT as a means of music performance
- What constitutes a musical ensemble?

Firstly, only one of the examination boards could be said to be genuinely inclusive in respect of encouraging the use of ICT as means of musical performance. The other two examination boards discuss the use of ICT as means of 'enhancing' the musical performance of an instrumentalist or vocalist (but do not consider its influence as worthy of any assessment process or credit), or allow pupils to include ICT as part of their musical performance but insist on there being a live element to the performance as well. There are also some very strange prohibitions on what counts as performing skills, stating clearly that DJ-ing does not contain the necessary elements of musical performance to allow an accurate assessment to be made and is therefore not permitted. Why is this examination board only excluding DJ-ing on this premise? What about all the other performers who make use of sophisticated sampling and triggering devices alongside complex sound diffusion systems as a means of musical performance? Or how about the sophisticated software environments such as AudioMulch that allow pupils to initiate, process and combine live and recorded sounds through a process of improvisation and composition with a computer keyboard? Under this definition, these activities fail to count as musical performance too. These restrictions are artificial and prejudiced against the wealth of performance practice that exists in certain technologically enriched musical communities. Teachers should seriously consider these issues as they make choices about which examination specification to use with their pupils. The inherent messages behind the decisions of examination boards can send strong messages to our pupils as to what is counted or valued as authentic musical performance.

Secondly, one can find different approaches to what constitutes a musical ensemble in these examination specifications. Whilst all examination boards consider it valuable to

assess pupils' skills of ensemble playing, there are some curious anomalies drawn out by the above comparison. The size of the group is one such issue, as is the nature of the musician's role within it. The most extreme example is that where one pupil accompanies a 'solo' instrumentalist, perhaps on the piano or guitar. In this situation, the soloist is not playing in an ensemble but the accompanist is on account of the fact that they are doing the accompanying! This seems bizarre to any musician who is used to playing in this situation. Surely the roles of soloist and accompanist are interdependent and each relies on the other for a successful ensemble performance.

Task 3

Consider the performances requirements from the National Curriculum and your department's GCSE specification against the range of opportunities that you give your pupils to perform throughout schemes of work in Key Stages 3 & 4. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Can I broaden my pupils' performances opportunities in any way?
2. How can I assist all pupils to make more effective use of ICT as a musical performance tool?
3. What is the best way to teach an ensemble skill and how can my pupils practise these skills most effectively?
4. What are the links between musical performance at Key Stage 2, 3 and 4? How can I strengthen these within my own teaching and by working with other staff?

Developing Performance: Classroom issues facing the music teacher at Key Stages 3 & 4

This brief overview of the requirements of the National Curriculum and GCSE specifications paints the backdrop for the classroom teachers' important work in fostering the performing skills of their pupils. There are a number of practical issues that teachers will have to consider as they seek to achieve this end.

1. Differentiated Approaches to Performance

Teachers need to provide differentiated approaches to musical performance. Put simply, teachers will need to ensure that all pupils are engaged by the musical performance opportunities that are presented. There is tremendous scope in how teachers can achieve this through:

- a) The provision of differentiated parts within a class performance setting;
- b) The incorporation of a range of group performance pieces, drawing on repertoire from world and popular music as well as the Classical tradition;
- c) Ensuring that a range of notational systems are used for performance activities (including no notation at certain points);
- d) Making maximum use of performance opportunities that derive from compositional activities;
- e) Developing a range of performance instruments including the use of ICT as a tool for musical performance.

2. Generating a Sense of Ensemble, Rehearsal Techniques and Group Work

The ensemble performance is a valuable occasion and can be used to develop a range of skills. The teacher's role within these situations will include directing, encouraging, suggesting, questioning, facilitating and modelling. Achievement should be balanced against motivation and engagement for the whole class. Inactivity or coasting is a danger if a teacher neglects issues relating to the pace of the lesson and the need for differentiation of activity, outcome and task. The careful use of ICT within classroom performance settings can be very valuable. Teachers can model or underpin sections of pieces, or arrangements of parts, by using prepared MIDI files. This approach will prove motivational for pupils as they hear their own musical efforts supported and augmented through technology.

Teachers have the opportunity in whole class performance situations to share musical understanding through the appropriate use of musical language, managing and solving problems, making decisions about musical features of the performance and working through those outcomes that they are hoping to see exhibited in their own pupils' work. It is important that they seek to involve pupils in these considerations, to question them about aspects of the performance and ask for their input when appropriate. The tone of such occasions should be of a shared learning experience rather than that of a dictatorial 'conductor-type' figure who is seeking to impose their musical authority on a group of players. As teachers demonstrate these skills in public, pupils need to be encouraged to adopt them in their own group work.

3. Concerts & presentations

Musical performances can be the highlight of a pupil's musical education. These opportunities can take many different forms. They can be formal events or part of the day-to-day life of the school, taking place in school assemblies, parents' evenings or award nights. The practice of lunchtime concerts – formally in the school hall or informally in the school canteen – can all be used to give pupils the opportunity to share their work with others. The presentation of classroom music in formal settings, including composition work, can be very motivating and rewarding for pupils.

Conclusion

Miles Davis' classic album *Kind of Blue* is a classic in the history of improvised music and the best-selling jazz album of all time (Davis 1959). The sleeve note that Bill Evans wrote to accompany the album is fascinating. (It can be accessed at).

Evans discussed a number of themes that transfer to the classroom world of music teaching and learning. Firstly, he writes of spontaneity, naturalness and uninterrupted expression within a strict, Japanese form of ink painting. What he described as the limitations or boundaries of the practice became the framework within which the skilful artist produced something of great beauty.

Musical performance has its own strict disciplines and practices. There are the obvious skills of instrumental technique, manipulation of technological interfaces, interpretation and teamwork which all need to be taught and learnt in a structured manner. But it is through learning about the boundaries of musical performance, the established norms and practices from a range of musical styles, that pupils will begin to express what music means to them. So if musical performance is to be taught musically, with sensitivity and care, then teachers will have to deal with issues that relate to pupils' own lives and experiences. Kushner put it like this:

The closer we look at music events in schools the more we see that music is the pretext – life is the text. (Kushner 1999, p. 216)

Musical performance is about self-expression and interpretation rather than merely being a passive channel of delivery for the composer's instructions. Through musical performance pupils can draw on their own life experiences and thoughts about music, whether it be someone else's or their own composition. This intimate revelation in a public space needs to be handled with great sensitivity and care. The skill, sensitivity and careful control of classroom opportunities for musical performance will be an essential test of teaching.

Secondly, what marks this album out from others is the collective thinking of the various musicians. These jazz musicians have sophisticated musical skills, yet it is aspects of their humanness that shine through. Characteristics such as sympathy, empathy, reflection and appreciation of the role of others, and an awareness of one's shifting role and importance in changing contexts are just as crucial here.

These skills are vital to any effective musical performance. Given that group work is the most common medium in musical performance at Key Stage 3, ensemble skills need to be taught and developed in a structured way. The centrality of effective listening and appraising skills in both musical performance and composition has been commented on frequently in this book.

Thirdly, Davis made use of the technology of his day to inspire both his own and others' musical practice. Although there were technical problems throughout the recording process, the ambience of the recording studio, the self-induced pressure to complete the recordings in one take and the permanence of the finished product (the audiotape) all permeated the creative process.

For many pupils musicality is caught up and defined by notions of musical performance rooted in traditional beliefs and values about instrumental skill. The acquisition of a musical instrument is only the first step in a long process towards mastery of that instrument. At an advanced level, the ways in which instrumentalists and composers push at the boundaries of an instrument's capabilities, stretching its sound quality to explore new timbres only goes to show that a musical instrument is only a particular type of technology and really no more than a 'field of possibilities' (Théberge 1997, p.187) for exploration and experimentation.

Several key aspects of musical performance need careful consideration and perhaps redefinition as ICT become more common within the classroom. The majority of the examination boards are well behind the times and teachers need to take the lead and find authentic models of musical performance from elsewhere. They should challenge the presumptions made by certain GCSE specifications and work together to insist that wider models of musical performance be given a legitimate status.

Finally, Evans writes about the ‘sketches’ and ‘settings’ that Davis brought to the recording session. In this art form, as in many others, creativity and spontaneity are not freak, decontextualised processes. There is a process of outworking from a simple framework that leads to the final product. The quality and simplicity of Davis’ initial ideas were a key factor in this process.

Similarly, the opportunities for musical performances in the classroom need not be complex or grand in design. Simple sharings of musical ideas, composition ‘works in progress’ or tailored classroom arrangements can all be used as a platform for the development of pupils’ performance skills. The careful development of these opportunities in the context of secure relationships between teacher and pupils will result in quality musical performances that are marked by creativity and spontaneity.

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